

Death Warrant for Hugh McLeod, Assynt, 1831 (L/INV/HC/12/29)

In March 1830, peddler Murdoch Grant was travelling through Assynt in search of business. A known face, the locals were puzzled when he mysteriously vanished from sight until, four weeks after he was last seen, his body was discovered in Loch Torr na h Eigen.

No one was sure if he met with a tragic accident or his fate had been sealed by someone else, but on consulting one of the most learned and respected men in the parish, Hugh McLeod - the local schoolmaster, he suspected it was nothing more than an accident. It remained a mystery, however, where the victim's belongings were. As a peddler, he often had large amounts of goods and money on his person, the amount was around £40 when he was last seen but nothing was discovered with the body. Investigations halted until, local man Kenneth Fraser – also known as Kenneth the Dreamer – had a vision about the victim's belongings. He saw them under a cairn, a description of which was recognised by the locals. This vision turned out to be accurate, a number of items of the victim were found here and the theory of murder and robbery again came to the forefront. Hugh McLeod, the once respected schoolmaster, appeared to be spending a large amount of money around the parish despite having quit his teaching job and had even had a £5 note – a rare find for a man with no job. His house was searched and clothing and goods of the unfortunate peddler were found in McLeod's possession. McLeod was transported to Dornoch and an entry can be found for him in the Dornoch Jail Book on the 10th of May 1830. He indicted in August 1830, but he continued to claim his innocence. His trial was not until the following year, September 1831, but he was found guilty and sentenced to death, his death warrant from the Inverness High Court can be seen below. He is later said to have confessed his guilt to a Reverend, saying he used a hammer to murder Murdoch Grant.

He was executed at the Longman on the 24th October 1831, but that was not the end of the story of the Assynt Murderer. Seen in the Death Warrant below, his body was to be transported to the University of Edinburgh, to the care of the Professor of Anatomy. His body was to be publicly “dissected and anatomized”. A receipt for the transfer of the body is found in the bottom right hand corner of the warrant.

“Whereas by the Verdict of an Assize dated the Twenty Seventh day of September Eighteen hundred and thirty one years against Hugh McLeod Prisoner in the Jail of Inverness he was found guilty of the Crimes of Murder and Robbery. In respect whereof we the Lords Moncreiff and Medwyn two of the Lords Commissioners of Justiciary, have Decerned and Adjudged the said Hugh MacLeod to be carried from the Bar back to the Tolbooth of Inverness therein to be detained and fed on bread and water only until Monday the twenty fourth day of October next to come, and on that day betwixt the hours of Two and Four o'clock in the afternoon, to be taken from the said Tolbooth to the common place of Execution of the said Burgh, or to such place as the Magistrates of Inverness shall appoint as a place of Execution, and then and there by the hands of the Common Executioner to be hanged by the neck upon a Gibbet until he be dead, and his body to be thereafter delivered over to the Professor of Anatomy in the University of Edinburgh to be by him publickly dissected and anatomized, which is pronounced for Doom; Requiring thereby the Magistrates of Inverness and the Keepers of their Tolbooth as we hereby Require and ordain them to receive and detain the said Hugh McLeod Pannel, and to see the said Sentence carried into execution, as they shall be answerable at their highest peril. Given at Inverness the said twenty seventh day of September Eighteen hundred and thirty one years (signed)

James W. Moncreiff, J.H. Forbes

I hereby certify the above to be a true copy
of the original warrant in my possession and
as such the Town Seal is thereto affixed
Camp'I Mackintosh Town Clerk

Edinburgh College 2nd November 1831
I hereby acknowledge to have received
the body of Hugh McLeod, according
to sentence. For Dr Munro [?]
John Arthur”